

Stratification and Class



It has been suggested that class is 'sociology's only independent variable'. Explain and evaluate this claim.

A good approach to this question would be to clarify what the question is asking. You can return to Chapter 2 to make the distinction between independent and dependent variables before moving on to a discussion of the use of social class as a central sociological concept. This might act as a useful route into discussing the continuing salience of class.



Class analysis is of course a cottage industry in its own right and you need to avoid getting bogged down in too much description of the various surveys or the technical details of various schema. You will, however, want to examine the theoretical and empirical debates about whether or not class persists. Pakulski and Waters's argument about the 'death of class' was a very bold claim which has proved difficult to sustain (see pp. 447-8). However, their critique may be able to generate a number of more limited claims, and this is where the discussion of variables comes into its own.

When we talk about the 'importance', 'strength' or 'salience' of class, we are essentially concerned with our capacity to predict or explain people's characteristics, behaviour or attitudes on the basis of their social class position. Various critiques of class analysis exist and it might be useful to rehearse a few to show that you understand what is at stake in these debates. A major issue is the problem of gender and (perhaps to a lesser extent in a European context) ethnicity. This is both a technical and empirical argument. Pages 460-3 deal with the role of working women in households and the impact this has upon attempts to identify their class positions.

Pages 458-60 address the importance of another variable, that of 'lifestyle'. This is a tricky area, so you will need to tread carefully. There are two distinct arguments going on here. One concerns 'lifestyle' as an 'outcome variable' and claims that class is unable straightforwardly to predict lifestyle choices. This is the 'blurring' argument, which points to the increasing similarities in the way we dress and speak, and the goods and services we purchase. It has some connection to the 'embourgeoisement' thesis (pp. 453-4) and is empirically sound, up to a point. However, there is a second and bolder argument, occasionally reproduced in newspapers and magazines, namely that 'lifestyle' is now as important or more so in determining 'who one is'. This is an argument about identity and people's sense of self and it is valid within bounds, but it does need to be separated from other strands of the debate.

One way of giving the essay a more empirical feel is to use a specific case study to show ways in which class can be helpful in predicting or explaining outcomes, and also its limitations. Two possibilities are available. Social mobility is in some ways the archetypal example, using class position during childhood as the origin, to predict class position during mature adulthood as the destination. Another option would be to draw on material on voting behaviour from Chapter 22 in order to write about the ways in which political expression is still shaped by social class alongside other factors such as gender and age.